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ABSTRACT

This document describes responses by Native American high school graduates in the Pacific Northwest who were surveyed about their high school experiences. Rather than belabor the issues of at-risk youth, dropout rates, and the failure of schools to adequately address Indian students' needs, this study looks at how schools have helped Indian students to succeed. The study focuses on the positive, with the assumption that schools can and do make a difference. Most of the respondents said they "liked school a lot" and were involved in one or more extracurricular activities, sports being the most popular. Students reported that teachers were the strongest influences in their school experiences. Students were asked to name the most helpful characteristics of teachers. The three highest-ranked responses were "complimented me when I did well," "respected me," and "caring." Graduates were surveyed on the most important things that motivated them toward completing high school. The students' responses to this question were organized into three categories: people, events, and values. The document lists responses under each category. Graduates were asked what advice they would give teachers to encourage Indian students to complete high school. By far the most common advice graduates offered was for teachers to provide encouragement to their Indian students. Other suggestions cited patience, open-mindedness, and academic challenge. (TES)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

Teachers Do Make A Difference: What Indian Graduates Say About Their School Experience

Research and Development Program for Indian Education

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TEACHERS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: WHAT INDIAN GRADUATES SAY ABOUT THEIR SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Introduction

For the past sixteen years the Research and Development Program for Indian Education has worked to improve the quality of education available to Native American students. During the last two years the Program has sought information from Indian students who have successfully graduated from high school in the Northwest. The rationale for this study was threefold. First, such a study would focus on the positive. Rather than belaboring the issues of at risk youth, dropout rates and the failure of schools to adequately address Indian students' needs, the study looks at how schools have helped Indian students succeed. Second, the Program strongly believes that schools can and do make a difference. While there are a variety of factors which influence the lives of Indian students, the school does play a very important role. Finally, it was hoped that the results of the study would provide practical suggestions for teachers and other school personnel. The school experiences of Indian graduates give us a great deal of insight about the teaching craft.

A Profile of a Typical Successful Indian Student

Yolanda walked up to the podium, shook the superintendent's hand and received her diploma. "I've done it! I'm graduating from high school. I never thought I'd make it!"

She's one of the first in her family to receive this recognition. She's one of many now successfully graduating from one of the more than eighty public high schools in Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington which serve a significant number of Indian students.

The schools are generally located in rural areas on or near reservations. Enrollments range from small to moderate with about one-third of the students of American Indian heritage. The typical Indian student graduating from one of these schools liked school, their teachers and the other students. In particular, they liked the social and extracurricular activities of the school, but had mixed feelings about the classes and atmosphere of the school.

The student was involved in more than one extracurricular activity, usually sports and clubs. He or she was also active in the community, engaged in sports and/or church functions. The student had just under a "B" average, but felt that they excelled more in extracurricular activities than in coursework.

The Indian graduate felt that teachers particularly influenced them to succeed in school, but counselors and coaches also played an important role. A small number of teachers were most instrumental, rather than their teachers in general. They characterized these teachers as "complimented me when I did well," "respected me," "caring," "listened to me,"

"having a positive attitude," and "concerned." Least helpful were teachers who were "easy" or "let me get away with not following the rules."

This senario encapsulates the results of a survey returned by more than three hundred Indian students graduating from high schools in Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington in the Spring of 1987 and 1988. The results of the survey follow.

Survey Results

Of the three hundred and six respondents, forty-two percent were male and fifty-eight were female. The most responses were from Washington (35%), followed by Montana (29%), Oregon (27%) and Idaho (9%). When asked what statement best captures their feelings about school in general, the distribution of responses were:

- 61% liked school a lot
- 30% liked school a little
- 7% didn't like school very well
- 1% hated school

They were asked how well they liked six areas of school. In descending order, they most liked:

- 74% liked the other students
- 73% liked the teachers
- 69% liked the extracurricular activities
- 65% liked the social activities
- 61% liked the classes
- 56% liked the school atmosphere

Students indicated what extracurricular activities they were involved in. Essentially all of the students were involved in one or more activities. In descending order, the students participated in:

- sports, 81%
- clubs, 62%
- chorus, 30%
- newspaper/yearbook, 28%
- band, 23%
- drama, 18%
- student government, 18%
- cheerleading, 12%
- debate, 7%
- other, 23%

They were also asked to indicate what community activities they were involved in. Again, a large proportion of the students were active in the community. In descending order, they noted participation in:

- sports, 53%
- church, 37%
- tribal, 25%
- civic organizations, 16%
- other, 24%

In terms of school performance, the grade point average of the group was 2.78 with many having greater than a 3.00 and few with less than a 2.00. Fifty-five percent felt that they excelled in their coursework, while fifty-nine percent felt that they excelled in extra-curricular activities. Seventeen percent mentioned other areas in which they had made exceptional effort.

School personnel play a significant role in the lives of the students. They were asked which school personnel influenced them to succeed. In descending order, they responded:

- teachers, 77%
- counselors, 50%
- coaches, 39%
- Indian education staff, 33%
- administrators, 22%
- secretaries, 15%
- nurses, 5%
- cooks, 4%

Since the teachers are apparently the most influential in the student's school life, they were asked how many especially helped them to succeed. Most (57%) identified between one and three teachers. Another thirty-one percent said three to ten teachers were particularly helpful. Very few (7%) identified more than ten teachers and almost none (5%) said that no teachers had been especially influential in helping them succeed in school. The respondents were also asked to describe those teachers that were most helpful. In descending order, the traits which students most frequently felt characterized these teachers were:

- complimented me when I did well, 80%
- respected me, 77%
- caring, 75%
- listened to me, 72%
- positive attitude, 71%
- concerned, 70%
- honest, 69%
- provided advice when I asked, 67%
- patient, 66%
- made school interesting, 65%
- open minded, 65%
- gave help willingly, 65%
- encouraged me to set goals, 65%
- had high expectations for me, 64%

The least frequently mentioned characteristics were:

- an easy teacher, 15%
- let me get away with not following the rules, 7%

Graduates were then asked to describe the most important things that happened in school which they felt motivated them to finish. The responses of the students provide interesting insights into human motivation. The students' comments could generally be organized into three interrelated categories which they felt were significant in their lives -- people, events

and values. The relationships with other people were most frequently mentioned. In descending order, these included the motivation, support and personal relationships of:

- teachers
- friends
- parents
- counselors
- principals
- coaches
- siblings

They described school staff who took a personal interest in them and provided caring encouragement. Friendships with other students and seeing them succeed were also important.

Several significant events or experiences were also mentioned as important in helping the student succeed. Participation in sports was most frequently mentioned, followed closely by other extracurricular activities. Being recognized and supported for special talents (awards, championships, etc.) were also key. Having a child was mentioned by several. Liking school, classes and the reward of good grades or other successes in class were noted.

But the most enlightening comments deal with the values of the students themselves. Many spoke of the satisfaction gained from experiencing success in self-fulfilling activities. This was driven by a desire to succeed, to be self-motivated and to be personally responsible for one's achievements. Many also mentioned the importance of goals in their lives, to graduate, go on to college, a career or the military. Fear of failure and the negative examples set by family, friends and siblings also played a part. Some students intended to prove to themselves and others that they could and would succeed. A number of students were convinced of the value of education and the independence, satisfaction and personal pride which it could bring. Finally, students mentioned persistence -- of not being a "quitter".

From these comments it is clear that students learned much from their experiences in school which they felt were directly relevant to their life as adults:

- you can set goals and experience satisfaction in their accomplishment
- you do have special talents at which you can excel
- you are personally responsible for your successes and failures
- persist in the face of adversity
- be proud and others will be proud of you
- there are people who care
- do your best.

Graduates were asked what advice they would give to teachers on how to encourage Indian students to complete high school. By far the most common advice graduates offered was for teachers to provide encouragement to the Indian students. This was mentioned three times more often than any other suggestion. They suggested that such encouragement

includes prompting the student to set and accomplish goals, and to tell the students that they can succeed. Another commonly mentioned recommendation was to treat Indian students as equal to non-Indian students. This did not mean that the teachers should view all students the same, but as equal. For example, don't put the students down, but rather instill pride in their heritage. Show them that they are important, be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, talk to them as individuals, take an individual interest in each student and don't patronize them.

Many just wanted the teacher to be available -- to be there for individual help, to show that they care, and to not give up on the students. Following these suggestions were a series of frequently mentioned remarks which describe teaching behavior:

- be open minded and LISTEN
- challenge the student
- provide interesting, successful experiences
- show consideration and respect
- be patient
- be firm, but not coercive
- be fair, trusting and honest
- give clear directions
- provide praise
- involve the Indian student in class activities
- relax and smile!

The students expressed a desire to have teachers with talent and sensitivity, who did not view students as stereotypes. "The teachers I've had in high school encourage anyone they feel can do better, race does not matter to a great teacher."

"The advice I would give is to be very patient; let the students know that you care what they do (and) that you'll be there if they ever need someone to talk to. Show some kindness. Also, there will be times when you'll have to be strict and firm."

Finally, one respondent summed it all up:

"Treat students with respect. Don't weed out the good from the bad. Be a friend to all, not just certain people. Be firm, but caring. Look at all aspects and all points of view. Don't take sides. Be grown up, but remember what it was like to be a teenager or a child. Get to know the student as they are, not (as) what you feel they should be. Take one day at a time. Forgive and forget. Don't hold grudges. Students need to learn from their mistakes. They are still growing up. Always have a smile on your face and think of what you are going to say before you say it."

The final question asked what advice the graduating student would give to younger Indian students which would encourage them to complete high school.

There was a heavy emphasis on high school providing a means to a brighter future whether that be a job, further schooling or playing a leadership role for Indian people. There was a lot of appeal to pride in oneself and confidence building approaches, as well as strong advice to do your best in classwork, set and achieve goals, participate in extracurricular activities, and learn to seek help from school personnel.

Although fewer in number, there were several don'ts: Don't do drugs and alcohol; Don't wind up like other dropouts; Don't be influenced by the wrong people, and, Don't give up!

Following are the most common types of advice given to younger students:

- better future
- perseverance
- do your best
- you can do it if you want to
- prove to people that Indians can succeed
- take part in extracurricular activities
- do what is best for you, don't listen to people who would lead you astray.

The advice for the most part was sound and usually very direct and to the point. "I guess I would say---No, I would say to Indian students that whatever they do in life, do it with all they could give and be as positive and open minded as possible. They can do what they want if they set their minds to it. Indian people will survive by the younger generations, and that's us. We've got to show them we can do it. I'm going to do my part and graduate from high school. Graduating from high school is just a small stepping stone in life, but it makes you feel so good knowing you've accomplished that yourself. Graduating gives you so many options in life. Indians have somewhat been looked down upon in education because not many Indians graduate. But Indians are tired of being at the bottom of the totem pole, at least this Indian is, and this Indian is going all the way to the top; past the top even."

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- Developing and disseminating effective educational products and procedures
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- Providing technical assistance in educational problem solving
- Evaluating effectiveness of educational programs and projects
- Providing training in educational planning, management, evaluation and instruction
- Serving as an information resource on effective educational programs and processes including networking among educational agencies, institutions and individuals in the region

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